

Alt-right Shadows over Gaming and Masculinities: A Systematic Narrative Review

Pablo Romero-Medina ^{1*}, Júlia Vilasís-Pamos ²

¹ Ph.D candidate, Department of Political Science and Administration, Universidad de Granada (University of Granada), Granada, Spain

² Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Pedagogy and Educational Psychology, Universitat de les Illes Balears (University of the Balearic Islands), Palma, Spain

* **Corresponding Author:** promeromedina@correo.ugr.es

Citation: Romero-Medina, P., & Vilasís-Pamos, J. (2024). Alt-right Shadows over Gaming and Masculinities: A Systematic Narrative Review. *Review of Communication Research*, 12, 154-167. <https://doi.org/10.52152/RCR.V12.10>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 25 Jul 2024

Accepted: 26 Aug 2024

ABSTRACT

During the last decade, events such as GamerGate and debates around gender inequality in video games have highlighted affinities between alt-right discourses and some sectors of the gaming community. This article contributes to the literature with a systematic narrative review of alt-right and gaming culture, focusing on masculinities and their discourses in the video game industry. We conducted bibliographic searches in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using terms in English and Spanish, such as “video games”, “alt-right”, and “masculinities”. We conducted two screening rounds by applying PRIMA and using Rayyan software, reducing the initial sample (n = 274) to 33 articles and book chapters. The review highlights the importance of linking Game Studies with the issues of masculinities and the alt-right. We advocate for a comprehensive model integrating Game Studies with the analysis of extremist forces, emphasizing the interconnectedness of various issues such as video games as political objects, historical and cultural media formation, and geek masculinity. Key recommendations include establishing a common framework, enhancing scholar-industry collaboration, and promoting solution-oriented research to address the influence of the alt-right in gaming communities.

Keywords: Alt-right, Gaming Culture, Masculinities, Video Games, GamerGate.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of the alt-right and gaming has been relevant within the field of Games Studies since the events of GamerGate, which impacted both communities and scholars. As a result, a significant amount of critical literature has been generated on the subject, and several lines of research have been developed. We aimed to contribute to these studies with a narrative review of the alt-right and gaming, with a particular focus on masculinities.

A systematic narrative review of the topic of the alt-right within the field of Game Studies allowed us to study its “state of the art” by analysing the key contributions that scholars have made in recent years (from 2013 to 2024). Therefore, we have been able to understand researchers’ focus and what seems to be the current problems of the research on video games and alt-right studies. By reviewing the analysis corpus, we found that contributions are disjointed and there are diverse interpretations of certain phenomena without a clear reference that helps to understand in depth the complex relationship between gaming culture and extremism; for example, the issue around not having a clear definition of gamer identities or the relation between these and the discourse of the alt-right created around gaming history.

In our work, we first propose a recapitulation of what has already been studied by Games Studies regarding the topic, with the aim to link the different contributions made by authors over the years. In particular, our article addresses the gap in creating a common framework to study the subject from outside and within Games Studies. Our analysis revealed that these types of contributions are normally relegated to studying specific national situations rather than looking at the issue from a more global perspective.

In the following sections, we present our analysis, which reveals notable developments concerning the presence of the alt-right in gaming communities. These developments often appear disconnected from one another. In addition, we identify two other significant issues. Firstly, there is a lack of collaboration between the gaming industry and academic scholars in studying these problems. Secondly, scholars rarely provide actionable recommendations for addressing these issues, with a few rare but significant exceptions (Saltman & El Karhili, 2024; Schlegel & Kowert, 2024). We posit that the absence of a unified framework contributes to the persistence of these problems, as this fragmentation hampers the progress of research.

ALT-RIGHT SHADOWS IN GAMING LITERATURE

This study aims to contribute to the research on gaming and the alt-right by carrying out a narrative review that summarizes the current state of this topic within the field of Game Studies. We have taken GamerGate as the starting point, as the alt-right gained political relevance after this period.

However, we have divided our theoretical framework into three parts that start before the cited event. Firstly, we would like to highlight that Games Studies has already worked on issues relevant to understanding our study subjects, such as masculinities and the discussion of one or multiple gamer identities.

Secondly, we explore topics of study that became central after the alt-right became more prominent in the public sphere and we identify masculinities, white supremacy and the geek subculture as the most discussed topics around this main issue.

Lastly, we discuss similar works to our proposal to determine their contributions to the field and their different approaches to the same subject. We found a clear difference between our more global-oriented perspective and other contributions with a local scope within their own countries.

Before the Storm

The study of the alt-right and its influence on the gaming world has been a key subject in the history of Games Studies, especially during and after GamerGate impacted even the DiGRA (Digital Games Research Association) itself (Chess & Shaw, 2015). The problem of gaming and the far-right has become increasingly important in the last decade inside and outside Games Studies. To tackle this issue, we propose a framework that we hope will be useful as a first step towards a global approach to the subject and as a common ground to bring together what has already been studied to achieve a deeper understanding of the problem.

First, we would like to point out that while the alt-right might not have been taken as a study subject in Game Studies before GamerGate, as it was not at the time politically relevant enough to attract attention from any scholarly field, Games Studies had already studied relevant aspects that are key to understanding these new political forces.

For example, some of the topics that currently seem important for understanding the issue of the alt-right in gaming were already within the scope of Games Studies as there were certain lines of research that were looking at problems that are relevant to our subject. These include works on masculinities and gaming (Thornham, 2008), studies that questioned the gender discourse in this medium (Hayes, 2007), the creation of the medium and its relation to masculinities (Kirkpatrick, 2013), and the works on the notion of a single possible gamer identity (Shaw, 2012). Even before GamerGate, some works for example had already explained the potential issues of the clash between hypermasculinities and other groups that questioned the hegemony of the white heterosexual male in gaming communities (Salter & Blodgett, 2012).

The Geek Crisis and Masculinities in Play

After GamerGate, studies related to masculinities in gaming (Taylor & Voorhees, 2018), their relation to the formation of the medium (Condis & Morrissette 2023) or the historically sexualized role of women in video game narratives (Cote, 2018), became more prominent as the issue evolved over the years.

Other lines of research, such as the sexualization of women in the media around video games (Fisher, 2015), or the debate on the gamer(s) identity (Muriel, 2018; Shaw, 2012), have also become more relevant.

This process has been studied more generally by works that have classified the growth of the extremism discourse within a general crisis of the whole geek subculture due to its arrival to the mainstream sphere (Scott, 2019). However, these works understand it as a consequence of parts of the geek communities wanting to protect their hegemony over certain fields (Lane, 2018). One of the main points has been to develop a subaltern model of masculinity called “geek masculinity” to explain how geek-dominated spaces have been historically masculinized by a hegemonic group (Condis, 2018). This model of masculinity is related to the video game industry due to how

the industry itself formed in its beginnings (Kocurek, 2015) and how the industry created a consumer identity, “the gamer” (Consalvo & Paul, 2019), that emphasized certain traits that can be related to this subaltern masculinity model.

The focus of these types of works has been to link similar phenomena of gatekeeping and hate discourses across the different fields of the geek subculture as a common reaction towards the changes resulting from geek culture becoming mainstream (Salter & Blodgett, 2017; Lane, 2018). There is a common point in these approaches that highlights that geeks were not blocking outsiders but rather trying to subdue subaltern subjects that in recent decades have gained a voice inside communities that they were already a part of (Scott, 2019).

The research that studied the alt-right using a more systematic point of view approached the problem by focusing on its impact on online media. Occasionally these studies focused on social media research related to the alt-right with the idea of understanding how the content creation and the users’ reaction might feed the alt-right discourses (Anwar & Giglietto, 2024). On other occasions, they focus on the affordances that these online platforms lend to the extremist discourses and thus help to expand their reach (Kakavand, 2024). In certain studies, this approach goes back to the gamer identity when discussing the demographics of certain online mobilizations, although they only consider the gamer identity as a variable for classifying certain demographics of the studied online communities (Maloney, Roberts, & Graham, 2019). In other cases, the authors link up different events that could be understood as a general reaction in the online communities even if they are formally separated in different interest spheres related by common spaces such as Reddit, like in GamerGate, the Fappening and the antifeminist movement online (Massanari, 2017).

There are some works that focus on a specific element of the extremism discourses, such as islamophobia as a component to mobilize users towards hate discourses and even real-life actions (Ahmanideen & Iner, 2024). Another example is the study of misogynistic communities online that can be traced to having relations with the alt-right (O’Hanlon et al., 2024) or research into specific risk factors that might explain the surge in the strength of extremist groups (Rolim, 2023).

Another important research field related to this topic includes the works that, even before GamerGate, already pointed to the problem of white supremacism as a source of imagination for mainstream games (Leonard, 2006; Brock, 2011), which could end up legitimizing racist narratives that exclude the problems of racialized people from video game imaginaries or even any type of representation (Higgin, 2009). In recent years, these works have developed further to express the ideological conflict promoted by the far-right that tries to create a “White History” where only non-racialized people are protagonists in video game narratives (Quiroga, 2023).

Nevertheless, there is currently a gap on the topic of summarizing the results of the different research works to contribute to determining a common framework to study the problem further. However, as we will see in the next section, there are some attempts to fix this situation.

Mapping Reviews on Video Games: Fields and Perspectives

In the scientific literature, video game reviews have emerged as a significant area of study, encompassing a broad spectrum of perspectives. These perspectives can be primarily categorized into two distinct domains: the psychological and health impacts of video games, and the cultural and political communication aspects of video games.

In the field of psychology and health, video game reviews have predominantly focused on the benefits and detrimental effects of video gaming. Numerous studies have highlighted the cognitive benefits of video games, such as enhanced problem-solving skills, improved hand-eye coordination, and increased attention and visuospatial skills (Brilliant, Nouchi, & Kawashima, 2019; Palaus, Marron, Viejo-Sobera, & Redolar-Ripoll, 2017). Conversely, other reviews have highlighted the negative implications, including gaming addiction, increased aggression, and decreased social skills (Anderson et al., 2010; Bensley & Van Eenwyk, 2001; King et al., 2019). For instance, King et al. (2019) conducted a comprehensive review that defined the prevalence of gaming disorder and its associated health risks.

However, there are very few video game reviews from the cultural and political communication perspective. Some reviews have researched how video games and media (in general terms) can influence political attitudes, behaviour, and participation (Kahne, Middaugh, & Evans, 2009), as well as be a source of motivation (Reid, 2012). Kahne et al. (2009) explored the role of video games in fostering civic and political engagement among young people.

From the perspective of political communication, particularly regarding video games and right-wing extremism, Wells et al. (2023) offer a unique contribution in their work, “Right-Wing Extremism in Mainstream Games: A Review of the Literature”. In the introduction, Wells et al. (2023) acknowledge a significant gap in

scholarly work that brings together the diverse research related to gaming and the alt-right or similar ideological groups. While scholars have produced works on this topic, particularly in the case of GamerGate, there is still a clear need for a unified framework for discussing the insights from Game Studies into the alt-right and its relation to gaming.

Even in the previously cited paper, the authors acknowledge a clear limitation in their work, as they focus on right-wing extremism in mainstream video games within the United States (USA). They explicitly state that there is a gap for two reasons.

First, as they express in the limitations section of their paper, the decision to focus on papers that only study the USA gaming communities isolated their work from any attempt to construct a more global perspective. However, they apply a thorough approach that could help to build up the necessary material for creating this global perspective in further studies. Second, as they chose to specifically study the problem of the alt-right in the USA, they had to establish a definition of what they are calling “right-wing extremism”, which, as they acknowledged, creates a somewhat closed definition that expresses their relatively local study. An example is the relation between white supremacy terrorism and the gaming communities as sources of recruitment or organization of these types of acts, which may not be easily found in gaming communities from other countries. In contrasting these domains and perspectives, it is evident that video game reviews in the psychological and health fields predominantly focus on the individual and the effects of video gaming. In contrast, reviews in the cultural and political communication fields emphasize the societal and political implications of video games. Nevertheless, and as we can see, especially in Wells et al. (2023) and Anderson et al. (2010), the Western, and in particular the U.S., approach dominates, prioritizing local perspectives, to the detriment of global ones.

Across this map of reviews, we can acknowledge the complex and multifaceted nature of video games, recognizing their potential for both positive and negative impacts. This underscores the need for continued interdisciplinary research to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role and impact of video games in contemporary society.

Therefore, to contribute to the field, we propose a globally oriented review that allows us to study the state of the art in alt-right and gaming research in a broader area. The objective is to make a summary of the key findings and to propose possible future lines of research that would be beneficial for developing the field.

METHODOLOGY

This study reviews the academic literature on alt-right and gamer communities, placing particular focus on masculinities. We conducted a systematic narrative review, a methodology that is very useful for qualitatively deepening the understanding of quantitative findings (Rodgers et al., 2009). This method was selected due to the limited nature of our sample, with the intention of exploring relationships and assessing the perspectives and approaches contained within the literature of our analysis corpus (Popay et al., 2006). Given the relative scarcity of literature addressing this subject, we aim to understand current contributions and investigate potential avenues for future research.

The process is meticulously detailed to ensure transparency and adopt a rigorous approach to analysing and understanding the current landscape of contributions regarding video games and alt-right movements, encompassing all studies in the literature after 2013. We chose the year 2013 because it marks a key point in time in the resurgence of alt-right formations as a political current, coinciding with the Trump campaign in the United States and the GamerGate episode (Stefanoni, 2021).

Following McFadden, Taylor, Campbell, and McQuilkin (2012), we employed systematic search techniques to retrieve relevant research studies pertaining to our topic. We used the guide in Page et al. (2021) (PRISMA - Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses-) to report the total number of papers considered for review and the selection process (**Figure 1**). Specifically, we made bibliographical searches on the following databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar.

All searches were conducted within one week (March 25-29, 2024), using the following keywords in both English and Spanish: “video games”, “gamer”, “alt-right”, “far-right”, “masculinities”, and “GamerGate”. Although the literature concentrates on English-speaking communities, incorporating Spanish reduces linguistic limitations and broadens the analysis. The search formulas (in English) are shown below:

(videogame* OR “video game*” OR “game*” OR “computer game*” OR “digital game”)

AND

(masculin* OR geek)

AND

(alt-right OR “alt-right” OR far-right OR “far right” OR extreme-right OR “extreme right” OR “right-wing” OR “right wing”)

We established double screening inclusion and exclusion criteria, considering typology and the aforementioned keywords. This process was carried out using the Rayyan software, which allows researchers to work both in parallel and individually, subsequently pooling the data to minimize biases in the analysis process. In addition, Rayyan software has both automatic and manual mechanisms for eliminating duplicates (n = 100), which is particularly useful when working with multiple databases, as in this study.

The first screening involved all the results obtained from the databases after deleting the duplicates (n = 274), considering only the title, abstract, and keywords. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for this initial phase were as follows (**Table 1**):

Table 1. Exclusion and Inclusion Criteria for the First Screening

Included	Excluded
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journal Articles • Book chapters • Publications in English • Publications in Spanish • Articles focusing on video games and alt-right/far-right/extreme-right ideology, movements, perceptions, ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publications in foreign languages • Duplicates • Publications that are clearly not related to video games and alt-right/far-right/extreme-right ideology, movements, perceptions, ideas • Editorials in journals and editorial introductions in book volumes • Monographs • Books • Conference Papers • Unpublished and pre-published articles (such as on arXiv) • Annual meetings, presidential addresses, keynotes, lectures • Reports and correspondences • Essays, brief research notes and short communications • Research protocols • Opinion articles, perspectives, commentaries, debates and blog posts

The first screening resulted in 15 disagreements, leading to a significant reduction in the sample to 35 articles from the initial 274.

The second screening, involving these 35 articles, was based on an in-depth reading of the texts. After the second screening, we excluded two book chapters. Both researchers conducted the readings and then pooled their findings, with only one disagreement noted. Thus, this phase considered the full text, adhering to the inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined (**Table 2**):

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for the Second Screening

Included	Excluded
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journal articles • Articles that are structured around the concept of video games and alt-right/far-right/extreme-right or these concepts thoroughly, at least in a section • Bibliometric/Scientometric reviews and analysis (if they explicitly associate video games and “alt-right/far-right/extreme-right”) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articles from predator journals (for instance, mdpi) • Articles that do not discuss video games and alt-right/far-right/extreme-right thoroughly or at least in a section • Bibliometric/Scientometric reviews and analyses that do not explicitly associate video games and alt-right/far-right/extreme-right

This second screening produced a final sample of 33 articles. **Figure 1** graphically illustrates the systematic search strategy and the double-screening process we followed:

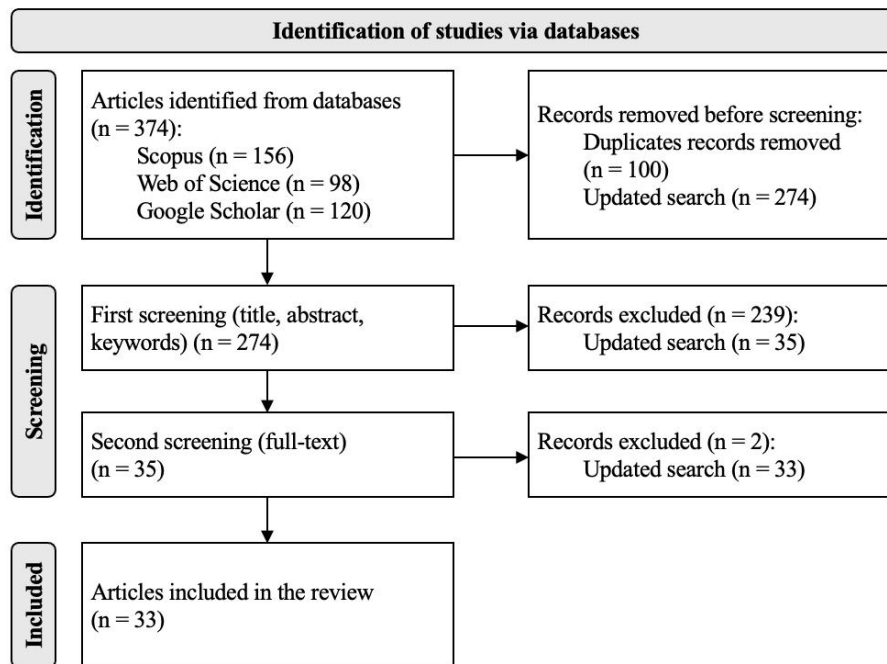


Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart as an Overview of Systematic Search Strategy and Double-screening Process

Finally, we analysed the 24 references included in the sample using the NVivo software. This process, also conducted by both researchers, made it possible to categorize contributions into specific themes: “alt-right movements”, “gaming communities”, “GamerGate”, and “masculinities”. The second round of coding allowed us to delve deeper and create subcategories such as “after GamerGate”, “before GamerGate”, and “toxic masculinity”. This analytical process facilitated a comprehensive mapping of contributions over time, considering the diversity of perspectives included in the study sample.

It is worth noting that the literature on far-right movements uses various terms (alt-right, far-right, extreme-right). However, this study has adopted the alt-right denomination proposed by Stefanoni (2021), while considering alternative terms in the literature. According to Stefanoni (2021), the alt-right is defined as a heterogeneous set of extreme right-wing currents situated outside conventional conservatism. Generally associated with white nationalism and, in some cases, with anti-Semitic and even philo-Nazi positions, the alt-right has an anti-establishment discourse, is irreverent, and is very active on the Internet. We chose Stefanoni’s (2021) definition because his work highlights the term’s special relevance during Donald Trump’s campaigns between 2015 and 2016. Notably, Clinton announced the emergence of the alt-right as an emerging racist ideology in the United States context. Although we start from this definition, which encompasses a set of currents connected along the lines of extreme right movements, in the analysis, we have kept the denominations used by the authors of the texts in order to reflect the current state of the literature on this issue.

VIDEO GAMES AS POLITICAL OBJECTS

The first element that we noticed in our corpus review was that few papers focused on video games as a political or ideological tool from a general perspective outside the specific case of GamerGate. It is striking that beyond our analysis corpus, there are fundamental references that address the video game from a political perspective, in particular Consalvo and Paul (2019), Mortensen (2018), Shaw (2015), and Muriel and Crawford (2018). In these cases, although they critically address gender issues and the importance of making visible and vindicating the margins of video game culture and the creation of new gamer identities, no direct connection is established with far-right movements. Mortensen’s (2018) case is different since his work deals with the concept of hooligans, establishing relations with the fanaticism of certain mainstream sports, but he does not specifically mention the possible connection of these movements with the alt-right.

It is precisely this aspect that is represented in our analysis corpus. One of the few exceptions is an interesting work that presents the importance of mobile games as a powerful political tool for reproducing and amplifying political discourse, using the example of the far-right populism in Turkey with Neo-Ottomanism and three

popular mobile games created based on this ideology (Turgut & Yayla, 2023). By carrying out both aesthetic and content analyses, Turgut and Yayla (2023) show the potential of mobile games to be sources for different political discourses. They suggest that video games could be used to propose and promote alternative and more egalitarian politics in opposition to the neoliberal entrepreneurship discourse. Another important contribution emphasizes gaming platforms as powerful tools for community-building and as vehicles for including ideological discourses to either introduce or reinforce political identities (Davey, 2024). In this case, even though Davey (2024) focuses on far-right wing groups as the main subjects of this tactic, the author also considers the possibility for other political forces to imitate their strategy. This perspective is shared by Kingdon (2024), who highlights gaming aesthetics as a very powerful and sometimes insidious tool for those who want to misrepresent or rewrite history on their own terms according to a political agenda. Although the emphasis of the analysis is focused on how European far-right groups have developed a mythical and false version of Ancient Rome and Greece that suits their story, it is also extended to other possibilities such as how even critical products like *Far Cry 5* can be appropriated by the far-right for their propaganda (Kingdon, 2019). Lastly, we can point out some approaches for studying the use of gamification as a method for promoting and reinforcing the far-right identity among its potential social base (Lakhani & Wiedlitzka, 2023). One of these approaches (Lakhani, 2024) adds another aspect to the discussion as they ask when gamification is an intentional strategy by extremist groups to generate community support or reinforce recruitment and when is it an organic result of the interaction between extremist groups and certain online communities (Lakhani, 2024).

Lastly, there are relevant contributions that describe the general framework of the alt-right and its relationship with gaming and that use GamerGate as a key event in this process. For example, the contributions propose that GamerGate was a prelude or an early trial of how the alt-right was able to grow in certain online communities, especially those of young people, by presenting themselves as the defenders of some groups who felt threatened and by being benefited by the toxic culture of some spaces (Bezio, 2018). Bezio's work can be highlighted as one of the few papers that strives to propose a more historically grounded perspective on the phenomenon without renouncing a unified vision of politics and gaming as scenarios that are not separate. Another case is Backe's proposal, which studies the potential of subversive narratives in games as an answer to the rise of the alt-right and as a tool for criticizing power structures in our society (Backe, 2018).

WHAT IS BEYOND GAMERGATE?

In our review, we have identified GamerGate as the most revised and discussed issue when the far-right phenomenon is studied by Game Studies. In this subsection we will discuss those works that are totally focused on the event and its consequences, although more references can be found in other works about masculinity and gamer identity, which we will explore in the next section "Masculinities and gamer identities: Do we understand each other?".

Papers have discussed the events of GamerGate, for example, their extraordinary ability to create and sustain a community able to promote their campaign on social media far more than other movements (Smith & Thai, 2020). To do this, they built network structures that helped people to incorporate the movement after the initial spike. Those same networks became useful for the alt-right to grow their audience (Smith & Thai, 2020).

Some works highlight the affinity between certain elements of gaming culture that tended to be masculinized by the influence of geek masculinity as a reason for the success of the movement (Dowling, Goetz, & Lathrop, 2019). For example, the masculinized status of the gamer culture is identified by some authors as a factor in understanding why some sectors of the gaming communities positioned themselves alongside GamerGate. The reason is that they thought it was an answer to the diversification of the gaming industry and the risk of losing some of their privileges in the community (Mortensen, 2018). This fear of losing a privileged masculinized space motivated the desire to gatekeep those who, from the point of view of the aggravated gamers, were not supposed to belong to the community (such as women and the LGTBQA+ community). One of the results of this fear was that GamerGate imposed on other people the requirement of being "authentic" and pressured journalists and people from marginalized groups (Hewa & Tran, 2023). This tactic was later used outside the gaming communities by different groups to discredit their opponents, especially in social media. This highlights the relationship between gaming cultures and the Internet and the influence of gaming culture on the Internet culture (Mortensen, 2018).

GamerGate has been identified as a rallying point for the political families of the alt-right, such as antifeminist, white supremacy or anti-Semitism, which have used the movement to get a foothold inside some gaming communities and also as an opportunity to promote their political agenda based on toxic masculinity and

misogyny (Mortensen & Sihvonen, 2022). Their common goal has been to silence marginalized groups and defend certain privileges related to toxic masculinity. Tactics and methods for harassing, intimidating and targeting individuals were also spread by the alt-right to help their cause (Dowling et al., 2020).

Although the vision of GamerGate as an alt-right movement is normally shared by most researchers, we found works which disagree with this notion. They examine it with empirical data that shows that the movement had a more diverse base both demographically and politically (Ferguson & Glasgow, 2021). However, these contributions based their position on an ambiguous political self-definition by the activists of GamerGate themselves without any other evidence. Nevertheless, we argue that the corpus of research has shown that GamerGate was an antifeminist movement that can be included within the sphere of the early pro-alt-right movement if we look at the core ideas of GamerGate (Bezio, 2018)

A common issue identified in our review is that much of the research remains focused on the topic of GamerGate, often without extending the discussion to the development of the alt-right in subsequent years or the debates around masculinity. Articles frequently lack theoretical or practical links between different lines of research, such as masculinities in gaming and the analysis of the alt-right. They tend to examine the events of GamerGate without proposing further connections to the current rise of far-right movements and new masculinist groups who attempt to influence gaming communities. In addition, the literature reveals a gap, as contributions do not consistently define concepts such as gamer identity or gaming culture, nor do they reach a common agreement on these definitions.

As we will explore in the next subsection, contributions around these topics tend to be isolated from other similar works and seem unable to propose a common contextual framework.

MASCULINITIES AND GAMER IDENTITIES: DO WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER?

One of the first elements that we noticed in most contributions is that there is no unified or common definition of terms such as “geek masculinity” or “gamer”.

For example, authors talk about gamers without defining the gamer identity (Harley, 2019; Woods, 2022; Gelūnas, 2022; Amarasingam & Kelley, 2024) or they approach the topic by using the division between hardcore and casual players without further reflection that connects the issue with the debates about the far-right and its presence in gamer communities (Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019;). This is especially relevant because during the last decade, the debate on gamer identity has gained momentum in academia (Shaw, 2015; Muriel & Crawford, 2018; Vilasís-Pamos & Pires, 2021). It is noteworthy that these works continue to start from the earliest idea of gamer identity, born in the 1980s in the United Kingdom (Kirkpatrick, 2015), leaving aside the contributions that have raised alternative definitions and that have shown the need to categorize the cultural margins to understand the restrictions and exclusion dynamics inherent to gaming culture.

In the few cases in which the literature establishes a connection between certain factions of the gaming community and the gaming culture, this connection is acknowledged almost always in relation to GamerGate (Muñoz-Guerado & Triviño-Cabrera, 2018; Dowling et al., 2019; Cote, 2020). The debate about the possible connections between GamerGate and the gaming culture seems to start and end with the discussions about this particular episode of cyber-violence, without any attempts to look beyond the situation ten years later.

On a similar note, in the corpus of the analysis, there is hardly any definition of what game culture is even if authors are discussing it directly or indirectly in their works. At this point, it is interesting to note that referents such as Muriel and Crawford (2018), define gaming culture as “the institutionalization of video game practices, experiences, and meanings in contemporary society, which places video games and video gaming as an important part of our social imaginary” (p. 18). Therefore, we cannot consider that there is a lack of references regarding the definition of the gaming culture, as there are numerous contributions in this line (Consalvo & Paul, 2019; Shaw, 2015; Juul, 2019; among others). Nevertheless, the literature in the corpus does not start from a definition of gaming culture, and therefore, forgets the relevance of the historical formation of the medium for understanding the relationship that this culture has with certain alt-right movements and, consequently, the consequences for the community.

The topic of gaming culture is mentioned by authors studying the uses of gamification or the aesthetics of video games by extremist groups (Kingdon, 2024; Lakhani, 2024), or when they consider the impact of GamerGate outside the gaming communities (Mortensen, 2018). Other authors, instead of talking about the gaming culture, prefer to address the influence of video games as a product without mentioning any specific

culture (Jenson & De Castell, 2018; Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019) or they write about the video game industry itself (Bulut, 2020).

However, authors agree to define video games, as a space or as a gaming culture, as a historical masculine and masculinized space (Bezio, 2018; Jenson & De Castell, 2018; Bulut, 2020). They also agree on presenting the white heterosexual male as the hegemonic subject in gaming communities (Cote, 2020; Gelūnas, 2022) who has developed an identity influenced by toxic masculinity (Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019; Dowling et al, 2019; Woods, 2022). The concept of toxic masculinity could be summarized as a model of masculinity that is useful for normalizing certain aggressive or violent attitudes as natural traits in boys and men. This allows these behaviours to become the cultural norm that guides men (Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019). Violent video games would supposedly help to normalize and extend the norms of toxic masculinity among their users by inscribing their cultural norms within the rules of the games.

Nevertheless, the process of masculinization of the game culture is normally explained by the nature and history of the medium. The literature normally does not connect the evolution of the medium with the political and social changes that happened in our societies in recent decades. The only exception is when GamerGate is mentioned by authors when they talk about geek masculinity or toxic masculinity and the alt-right. In these examples, they examine the relationship between these models of masculinity and the rise of extremist discourses (Muñoz-Guerado & Triviño-Cabrera, 2018; Mortensen & Sihvonen, 2022).

However, even when authors agree with the relationships between masculinities, video games and the far-right, there are some differences in perspectives among authors. Some authors relate the issue to the crisis of geek identity (Muñoz-Guerado & Triviño-Cabrera, 2018; Harley, 2019; Woods, 2022), where the need to gatekeep against outsiders from a subculture meets with anti-gender discourses that promote a masculinist vision of the medium that benefits the hegemony of the white heterosexual male over the different field of geek subculture (Scott, 2019).

Other authors place the focus on the existence of a masculinist white supremacism ideology that would be hegemonic in the video game industry promoting racialized and gendered discourse within the products and technologies of the industry. In this case, they omit to mention geek culture, even though this white supremacism aims to protect the privileges of those categorized within the definitions of geek masculinity (Bulut, 2020).

Blackburn and Scharrer (2019) use the concept of toxic masculinity to express how the traditional model of masculinity influences the attitude of gamers and their relationship with gaming, taking a more global perspective of the player base without focusing on geeks. Instead, they propose that anyone who plays certain video games must accept and follow specific masculinist cultural norms. This process is common among all users even if they do not fit the model of the hegemonic masculinity that guides the attributes of toxic masculinity.

Another issue that we have detected in the corpus is that there is hardly any practical connection between the contributions and the current situation of the industry. We find some propositions, such as the idea of “cozy streams”, to fight the toxic influences of the masculinist gamer identity by promoting an opposite and more inclusive queer identity (Youngblood, 2022). In addition, there are some proposals that demand public policies from different governments and the industry itself to regulate, moderate and fight extremist content in video games and gaming platforms, such as Twitch (Saltman & El Karhili, 2024; Schlegel & Kowert, 2024).

Outside of these few examples, scholars seem focused on reporting on the issue without giving any input on potential solutions or at least the initiative to discuss a common theoretical framework to progress in the discussion. There are a lot of contributions devoid of a common link among discussions that would allow the field to go beyond what already exists.

CONCLUSIONS

This review is a significant contribution towards highlighting the need to link studies on gaming culture with the issues of masculinities and the alt-right in gaming. We have demonstrated how these different lines of research are interconnected, and future contributions could benefit by adopting a more global-oriented perspective on these topics.

We propose developing a model that integrates the study of extremist forces with Game Studies. To achieve this objective, it is essential to understand that the various issues mentioned in the preceding sections, such as video games as political objects, the historical and cultural formation of the medium, and geek masculinity, should not be treated as isolated topics. Instead, we should work towards understanding the relationships between these

issues, as events like GamerGate have shown significant connections among them.

To address the problems identified in this review, we offer the following recommendations:

1. **Establish a Common Framework:** Contributions in Game Studies would benefit from a common framework that helps scholars connect their research and facilitates discussions between different contributions. This framework would clarify ambiguous concepts such as gaming culture and highlight the connections between various models of masculinity and their relation to the influence of the alt-right in some gaming communities.

2. **Enhance Collaboration Between Scholars and the Industry:** Improving the relationship between scholars and the gaming industry would make it easier to understand the structural changes influencing our object of study. Currently, information from the industry is rarely cited by scholars, except in anecdotes that strengthen certain arguments (Harley, 2020).

3. **Promote Solution-Oriented Research:** Research should aim to propose solutions for the issue of the alt-right, rather than merely describing the problem. Efforts should centre on focussing information towards viable solutions, a challenging task that only some contributions have successfully addressed (Schlegel & Kowert, 2024).

Finally, we reiterate that the absence of a unified framework contributes to the persistence of the various problems identified in this work because this absence leads to fragmentation in knowledge, which obstructs the progress of research. Addressing this gap is crucial for advancing our understanding and developing effective strategies to counter the influence of the alt-right in gaming communities.

In conclusion, bridging the gaps between different research areas, fostering collaboration between academia and the industry, and focusing on solution-oriented research will collectively enhance our ability to address the complex issues at the intersection of gaming culture, masculinities, and alt-right movements.

CONFLIC OF INTEREST

The authors stress that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

REFERENCES

- Ahmanideen, G., & Iner, D. (2024). The interaction between online and offline Islamophobia and anti-mosque campaigns: The literature review with a case study from an anti-mosque social media page. *Sociology Compass*, 18(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13160>
- Amarasingam, A., & Kelley, D. (2024). Hate and extremism on gaming platforms: Insights from surveys with the gaming community. In L. Schlegel & R. Kowert (Eds.), *Gaming and Extremism: The Radicalization of Digital Playgrounds* (pp. 110-129). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003388371-7>
- Anderson, C. A., Shibuya, A., Ihori, N., Swing, E. L., Bushman, B. J., Sakamoto, A., . . . Saleem, M. (2010). Violent video game effects on aggression, empathy, and prosocial behavior in Eastern and Western countries: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136(2), 151-173. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018251>
- Anwar, S., & Giglietto, F. (2024). Facebook reactions in the context of politics and social issues: A systematic literature review. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2024.1379265>
- Backe, H. (2018). A redneck head on a nazi body. Subversive Ludo-Narrative strategies in Wolfenstein II: The new colossus. *Arts*, 7(4), 76. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts7040076>
- Bensley, L., & Van Eenwyk, J. (2001). Video games and real-life aggression: Review of the literature. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 29(4), 244-257. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X\(01\)00239-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X(01)00239-7)
- Bezio, K. M. (2018). Ctrl-Alt-Del: GamerGate as a precursor to the rise of the alt-right. *Leadership*, 14(5), 556-566. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715018793744>
- Blackburn, G., & Scharrer, E. (2018). Video game playing and beliefs about masculinity among male and female emerging adults. *Sex Roles*, 80(5-6), 310-324. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-018-0934-4>
- Brilliant T, D., Nouchi, R., & Kawashima, R. (2019). Does video gaming have impacts on the brain: Evidence from a systematic review. *Brain Sciences*, 9(10), 251. <https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci9100251>
- Brock, A. (2011). "When Keeping it Real Goes Wrong": Resident Evil 5, Racial Representation, and Gamers. *Games and Culture*, 6(5), 429-452. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412011402676>
- Bulut, E. (2020). White masculinity, creative desires, and production ideology in video game development. *Games and Culture*, 16(3), 329-341. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412020939873>
- Chess, S., & Shaw, A. (2015). A conspiracy of fishes, or, how we learned to stop worrying about #GamerGate and embrace hegemonic masculinity. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 59(1), 208-220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2014.999917>
- Condis, M. (2018). *Gaming masculinity: Trolls, fake geeks, and the gendered battle for online culture*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press.
- Condis, M., & Morrissette, J. (2023). Dudes, boobs, and GameCubes: Video game advertising enters adolescence. *Media, Culture & Society*, 45(6), 1285-1302. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437231159533>
- Consalvo, M., & Paul, C. A. (2019). *Real games: What's legitimate and what's not in contemporary videogames*. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12109.001.0001>
- Cote, A. C. (2018). Writing "Gamers" the gendered construction of gamer identity in Nintendo power (1994-1999). *Games and culture*, 13(5), 479-503. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015624742>
- Cote, A. C. (2020). Casual resistance: A longitudinal case study of video gaming's gendered construction and related audience perceptions. *Journal of Communication*, 70(6), 819-841. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqaa028>
- Davey, J. (2024). Extremism on gaming (-adjacent) platforms. In L. Schlegel & R. Kowert (Eds.), *Gaming and Extremism: The Radicalization of Digital Playgrounds* (pp. 95-109). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003388371-6>
- Dowling, D. O., Goetz, C., & Lathrop, D. (2019). One year of #GamerGate: The shared Twitter link as emblem of masculinist gamer identity. *Games and Culture*, 15(8), 982-1003. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019864857>
- Ferguson, C. J., & Glasgow, B. (2021). Who are GamerGate? A descriptive study of individuals involved in the GamerGate controversy. *Psychology of Popular Media*, 10(2), 243-247. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000280>
- Fisher, H. D. (2015). Sexy, dangerous—and ignored. *Games and Culture*, 10(6), 551-570. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412014566234>

- Gelūnas, B. (2022). Depathologizing addiction: Considerations of hegemonic masculinity in and around problematic video gaming. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 31(2), 205-222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10608265221130509>
- Harley, D. (2019). Palmer Luckey and the rise of contemporary virtual reality. *Convergence*, 26(5-6), 1144-1158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519860237>
- Hayes, E. (2007). Gendered identities at play. *Games and Culture*, 2(1), 23-48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412006294768>
- Hewa, N., & Tran, C. H. (2023). Verified play, precarious work: GamerGate and platformed authenticity in the cultural industries. *New Media & Society*, 26(11), 6695-6714. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231158387>
- Higgin, T. (2009). Blackless Fantasy. *Games and Culture*, 4(1), 3-26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412008325477>
- Jenson, J., & De Castell, S. (2018). "The Entrepreneurial Gamer": Regendering the order of play. *Games and Culture*, 13(7), 728-746. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412018755913>
- Juul, J. (2019). *Handmade pixels: Independent video games and the quest for authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kahne, J., Middaugh, E., & Evans, C. (2009). *The civic potential of video games*. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/8518.001.0001>
- Kakavand, A. E. (2024). Far-right social media communication in the light of technology affordances: A systematic literature review. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 48(1), 37-56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2023.2280824>
- King, D. L., Delfabbro, P. H., Perales, J. C., Deleuze, J., Király, O., Krossbakken, E., & Billieux, J. (2019). Maladaptive player-game relationships in problematic gaming and gaming disorder: A systematic review. *Clinical psychology review*, 73, 101777. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2019.101777>
- Kingdon, A. (2019). Framing Far Cry 5: The gamification of white separatist propaganda. In E. Leidig (Ed.), *Mainstreaming the Global Radical Right* (pp. 257-262). Hannover, Germany: Ibidem-Verlag.
- Kingdon, A. (2024). Beauty is power: The use of gaming references and gaming aesthetics in extremist propaganda. In L. Schlegel & R. Kowert (Eds.), *Gaming and extremism: The radicalization of digital playgrounds* (pp.130-147). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003388371-8>
- Kirkpatrick, G. (2013). *Computer games and the social imaginary*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Kirkpatrick, G. (2015). *The formation of gaming culture. UK gaming magazines, 1981-1995*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137305107>
- Kocurek, C. A. (2015) *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting boyhood at the video game arcade*. <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816691821.001.0001>
- Lakhani, S. (2024). A is for Apple, B is for Bullet: The gamification of (violent) extremism. In L. Schlegel & R. Kowert (Eds.), *Gaming and extremism: The radicalization of digital playgrounds* (pp. 148-162). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003388371-9>
- Lakhani, S., & Wiedlitzka, S. (2023). "Press F to Pay Respects": An empirical exploration of the mechanics of gamification in relation to the Christchurch attack. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 35(7), 1586-1603. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2022.2064746>
- Lane, K. E. (2018). *Age of the Geek*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65744-8>
- Leonard, D. J. (2006). Not a hater, just keepin' it real. *Games and Culture*, 1(1), 83-88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412005281910>
- Maloney, M., Roberts, S., & Graham, T. (2019). *Gender, masculinity and video gaming*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28262-2>
- Massanari, A. (2017). #Gamergate and the fapping: How Reddit's algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures. *New Media & Society*, 19(3), 329-346. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815608807>
- McFadden, P., Taylor, B. J., Campbell, A., & McQuilkin, J. (2012). Systematically identifying relevant research: Case study on child protection social workers' resilience. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 22(6), 626-636. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1049731512453209>
- Mortensen, T. E. (2018). Anger, fear, and games: The long event of# GamerGate. *Games and Culture*, 13(8), 787-806. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016640408>

- Mortensen, T. E., & Sihvonen, T. (2020). Negative emotions set in motion: The continued relevance of #GamerGate. In T. Holt & A. M. Bossler (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of International Cybercrime and Cyberdeviance* (pp. 1353-1374). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90307-1_75-1
- Muñoz-Guerado, A., & Triviño-Cabrera, L. (2018). The erasure of female representation in geek spaces as an element for the construction of Geek identity: The case of Warhammer 40.000. *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 193-211. https://doi.org/10.1386/cjcs.10.2.193_1
- Muriel, D. (2018). *Identidad gamer: Videojuegos y construcción de sentido en la sociedad contemporánea*. Catalonia, Spain: AnaitGames.
- Muriel, D., & Crawford, G. (2018). *Video games as culture: Considering the role and importance of video games in contemporary society*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- O'Hanlon, R., Altice, F. L., Lee, R. K. W., LaViolette, J., Mark, G., Papakyriakopoulos, O., . . . Kumar, N. (2024). Misogynistic extremism: A scoping review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 25(2), 1219-1234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231176062>
- Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., . . . Alonso-Fernández, S. (2021). Declaración PRISMA 2020: Una guía actualizada para la publicación de revisiones sistemáticas. *Revista Española De Cardiología*, 74(9), 790-799. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.recesp.2021.06.016>
- Palaus, M., Marron, E. M., Viejo-Sobera, R., & Redolar-Ripoll, D. (2017). Neural basis of video gaming: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 11(248), 1-40. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2017.00248>
- Popay, J., Roberts, H., Sowden, A., Petticrew, M., Arai, L., Rodgers, M., . . . Duffy, S. (2006). *Guidance on the conduct of narrative synthesis in systematic reviews*. Retrieved from http://cpd.conted.ox.ac.uk/healthsciences/courses/short_courses/qsr/NSguidanceV1-JNoyes.pdf
- Quiroga, S. A. (2023). *White mythic space: Racism, the First World War and Battlefield 1*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110729306>
- Reid, G. (2012). Motivation in video games: A literature review. *The Computer Games Journal*, 1, 70-81. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03395967>
- Rodgers, M., Sowden, A., Petticrew, M., Arai, L., Roberts, H., Britten, N., & Popay, J. (2009). Testing methodological guidance on the conduct of narrative synthesis in systematic reviews: Effectiveness of interventions to promote smoke alarm ownership and function. *Evaluation*, 15(1), 49-73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356389008097871>
- Rolim, M. (2023). Fatores de risco para a radicalização. Estudo de revisão sobre as evidências internacionais. *Sociedade E Estado*, 38(2). <https://doi.org/10.1590/s0102-6992-e47232>
- Salter, A., & Blodgett, B. (2012). Hypermasculinity & dickwolves: The contentious role of women in the new gaming public. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56(3), 401-416. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.705199>
- Salter, A., & Blodgett, B. (2017). *Toxic geek masculinity in media*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66077-6>
- Saltman, E., & El Karhili, N. (2024). Level up: Policies, practices, and positive interventions to counter terrorism and violent extremism in gaming spaces. In L. Schlegel & R. Kowert (Eds.), *Gaming and extremism: The radicalization of digital playgrounds* (pp. 163-184). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003388371-10>
- Schlegel, L., & Kowert, R. (2024). *Gaming and extremism: The radicalization of digital playgrounds*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003388371>
- Scott, S. (2019). *Fake geek girls: Fandom, gender, and the convergence culture industry*. <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479838608.001.0001>
- Shaw, A. (2012). Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity. *New Media & Society*, 14(1), 28-44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811410394>
- Shaw, A. (2015). *Gaming at the edge: Sexuality and gender at the margins of gamer culture*. <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816693153.001.0001>
- Smith, J. D., & Thai, M. T. (2020). Supporting a storm: The impact of community on #GamerGate's lifespan. *IEEE Transactions on Network Science and Engineering*, 7(3), 1382-1393. <https://doi.org/10.1109/tNSE.2019.2929006>

- Stefanoni, P. (2021). *¿La rebeldía se volvió de derecha?: Cómo el antiprogresismo y la anticorrección política están construyendo un nuevo sentido común (y por qué la izquierda debería tomarlos en serio)*. Distrito Federal, Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores.
- Taylor, N., & Voorhees, G. (2018). *Masculinities in play*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90581-5>
- Thornham, H. (2008). "It's A Boy Thing" Gaming, gender, and geeks. *Feminist Media Studies*, 8(2), 127-142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770801980505>
- Turgut, H., & Yayla, N. (2021). Ottomentality as technology of self: How do mobile games aestheticize the entrepreneurial self?. In M. Erdem, N. Kocabay-Sener, & T. Demir (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Aestheticization of Violence, Horror, and Power* (pp. 417-438). <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-4655-0.ch021>
- Vilasís-Pamos, J., & Pires, F. (2021). How do teens define what it means to be a gamer? Mapping teens' video game practices and cultural imaginaries from a gender and sociocultural perspective. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25(12), 1735-1751. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1883705>
- Wells, G., Romhányi, A., Reitman, J. G., Gardner, R., Squire, K., & Steinkuehler, C. (2024). Right-wing extremism in mainstream games: A review of the literature. *Games and Culture*, 19(4), 469-492. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120231167214>
- Woods, O. (2022). Forging a more masculine self online: Demonstrating skill and sovereignty in the playing of first-person shooter games. *Feminist Media Studies*, 23(6), 2867-2882. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2095579>
- Youngblood, J. (2022). A labor of (Queer) love: Maintaining "Cozy wholesomeness" on Twitch during COVID-19 and beyond. *Television & New Media*, 23(5), 531-541. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764221080966>